

Modern forms of Buryat shaman activity on the Olkhon Island

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Abstract

Buryats live in Siberia. Their traditions are rapidly changing, but in some areas their traditional religion, shamanism, has survived. Even though it is influenced by globalisation, it still retains a quite strong position. Various shamanistic practices have been observed on Olkhon Island on Lake Baikal. These practices exist as the reaction to local people's needs as well as to the demands of the modern world. Drawing on the fieldwork conducted in 2010, this article focuses on three forms of practicing shamanism: the first is mostly for tourists; the second is conducted via the shamans' organisation; the third is practiced in small villages. All these forms portray the diversity of a modern shamanism that changes and seeks its place in a complex reality.

KEYWORDS: Buryat shamanism, shamanistic practices, indigenous peoples of Siberia

Introduction

Shamanism has become a popular subject in recent decades (Narby & Huxley 2001: 4). There seems to be a lot of speculation about the "revival" of traditional shamanism and about the so-called neoshamanism (Townsend 2004: 49). Both of these phenomena are often confused. Nevertheless, knowledge about shamanism is not common. The practice is frequently considered a "satanic" act; however, shamanism has nothing in common with Christian view of diabolic activities. Many nations in the world practice shamanism. It is one of the oldest religious systems and, despite years of persecution of shamans and shamanists (adherents of shamanism), the foundations of the system has been preserved to this very day.

Shamanism is a peculiar kind of belief, the adherents of which acknowledge the existence of a supernatural realm parallel to everyday reality, inhabited by ghosts and deities capable of interfering with human souls. In most cases, those beings are not amicable and can harm people. The shaman is the only person that possesses the ability to communicate with ghosts in their world. Through falling in the trance and separating the body from the soul, the shaman can wander in the supernatural world in order to help the fellow tribesmen. While in the trance, the shaman can perceive and manipulate

all supernatural elements. Depending on the culture, the trance can be achieved through singing (e.g. Huaorani in South America) (Wierucka 2012: 52), playing drums (e.g. Tuvans in Siberia) (Kenin-Lopsan 1997: 111), using hallucinogens (e.g. Sacha Runa in South America) (Whitten 1976: 40) or through all these methods (e.g. Buryats in Siberia) (Fridman 2004: 94). In fact, it is impossible to perceive shamanism as homogeneous phenomenon, because each culture practices it in a different way.

The word *shaman* comes from the language of Siberian Evenks (Vitebsky 2001:10), and it initially meant “the man of power” in the Evenk culture. Later, the term started to be used to describe people of power in cultures of North America, while in the 20th century it became a definition of all people practicing trance and contact with the supernatural world. Over the course of time, the word became a description of various witch-doctors, healers or herbalists. Nowadays, even artists describe themselves as shamans, justifying this with altered state of consciousness they achieve when creating their works.¹ Of course, in this place we should consider the definition of shamanism and shaman, i.e. whether the term *shaman* should be applied to someone merely entering the trance, or someone who establishes contact with the supernatural, or perhaps we should use it to describe people who contribute to the society they live in through their activities? *The Shamanism Encyclopedia* defines the term shaman as a person ‘exploring the world of ghosts and human souls through a trance, the state of altered consciousness, used to make contact with the world of ghosts for the benefit of society’ (Walter & Fridman 2004: xi). In this sense, shamans would be people not only capable of entering the trance (regardless of the method), but also people who through their activities in the supernatural world are able to help their communities in solving various problems. This definition of shamanism will be adopted in the present work.

Tribal cultures practice shamanism in various ways. Nowadays, due to the new, sometimes very new, elements of media, this traditional variety is becoming even more diverse. Attempts made at merging the traditional and modern elements brought about an image of contemporary forms of shamanism that (due to their diversity) fulfil the needs of society or expectations of the outer world. The diversity of shamanistic practices held in Buryatia in central Siberia is a prime example of shamanism being adapted to the changing reality.

Cultural background

With a population of half a million, the Buryats constitute one of the biggest cultural groups of Siberia. They inhabit Irkutsk Oblast, the Buryat Autonomous Republic and several neighbouring Russian oblasts and parts of Mongolia. Names such as *Brat*, *Bratsk* or *Buriaad* (Friedrich 1994: 65) are also applied, the latter being used by the Buryats themselves. The Buryat language belongs to the northern subgroup of Mongolian languages

¹ The phenomenon was especially visible during the International Society of Shamanistic Research conference, held in October 2011, when 75% of presentations were focused not on the shamanism related to various cultures, but on the problems of artists and their work perceived as the effect of trance activities.

(family of Altaic languages). Until 1930, the Buryats had been using the Mongol-Altai writing system, between 1931 and 1939 they used Latin alphabet, and in 1939 they adopted the Cyrillic script, which they continue to use (ibid.). This brief analysis of the Buryat language notation system give us a clue about the influence of history on Buryat culture and about the changes that took place in the 20th century and earlier, before Buryatia became a part of Soviet Union and later Russia.



Figure 1: Map of Buryatia in Russian Federation (A. Wierucka)

Until the 17th century, Buryats led nomadic lives breeding cattle. Due to the necessity of traveling fast with their herds, Buryats' houses were made of light wood covered with felt (the so-called yurts, in Buryat *ger*). The yurts could be entered from the south only. Later, Russian settlers popularised wooden houses built on a rectangular plan. Initially, the Buryats adapted the settlers' technique and used only wood to construct their houses. Over time, however, they adopted the Western type of house structure. Today, the yurts covered with felt can be seen only in museums, open-air museums or during various folk culture festivals.

Apart from breeding cattle, the Buryats were occupied with hunting (mainly deer, bears, foxes and wolves) for meat and furs. As in the case of most nomadic cultures, the meat constituted the main element of Buryats' diet, apart from milk and dairy products. *Kumys*, fermented horse milk that supposedly possess healing and magical properties, is one of the most famous Buryat products. Another traditional dairy product is called *tarasun*. It is a kind of alcohol, which today is often laced with vodka. During the period of Russian settlers' influx, the Buryats adopted the practice of baking bread, but it never played a significant role in their diet (ibid.).

Buryat society is patrilineal: the man and his closest relatives constitute the basic social unit, the so-called *ulas*, in most cases inhabiting a single village. A couple of

villages inhabited by people related to each other constitutes the so-called *urag*. Several *urags* constitute a clan, the so-called *xolbon* or *obag* (Fridman 2004: 101). The entire Buryat society was formerly divided into layers, including aristocracy, peasant class and slaves. Nowadays, those traditional social layers disappeared, and the Buryat society demonstrates a structure similar to the Russian society.

The Russian influence had a significant importance for cultural changes that took place in Buryatia. The first Russian settlers appeared on the Buryat lands in about 1645. Soon after, in 1689, Russia signed a treaty with the Manchurian Empire, which established a border between Russian and China states on the Argun River. Buryatia became a part of Russia during the reign of Peter I, at the beginning of the 18th century. In the middle of the 19th century, the Zabaykalskyi region was separated from Irkutsk province and became a distinct administrative region (Zabaykalskyi Rayon). At the beginning of the 20th century, in 1917, the first autonomous administrative unit was created. It included the terrains of Buryatia – Buryat-Mongol State, which in 1923 was transformed into Buryat-Mongol Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic with its capital city in Verkhneudinsk (later renamed to Ulan-Ude). The date is considered the year of creation of Buryat Republic, that since 1992 has possessed an independent status within the Russian Federation.

The culture of Russian settlers has influenced the local Buryat culture for hundreds of years. Houses, discussed above, built following Russian designs, or the system of language notation constitute only external signs of cultural changes. The changes, however, were much more profound in those areas of culture that are not so clearly visible at first glance. The former social structure eventually decayed, and years of repression strongly affected the possibility of language preservation. Today, many Buryats speak only Russian, even though there are still villages south of Baikal where the inhabitants use their ancestors' language on a daily basis.

The local economy that used to be based on breeding cattle and hunting also underwent changes. Nowadays, many Buryats suffer from poverty and have no hope for any change of their situation. Few people can afford their own cattle, game was killed off long time ago, and the sandy soil makes it difficult to cultivate plants. Modern Buryat society is also strongly affected by alcoholism, influencing both older and younger generations.

Traditional Buryat shamanism

Since ancient times, shamanism was the religion of the Buryats. According to Buryat mythology, the first shaman was an eagle that summoned good spirits that were supposed to protect people against evil demons. However, people could not understand the eagle's speech, and they did not trust it. The eagle asked the good spirits for the gift of speech to make the Buryats capable of understanding its words. The spirits agreed, and the outcome of the relationship of the eagle and a Buryat woman was the birth of a man who possessed shamanistic powers (Fridman 2004: 90).

The Buryats believe that each human being possesses three souls: one is located in the skeleton; the second one can travel the world in the form of a bee or wasp (dreams are considered to be the travels of this soul); the third one is transformed to another living being after death (the first soul disappears then while the second one is eaten by the spirits)

(Sandschejew 1927: 576). The second soul is the most prone to the influence of evil ghosts and can easily be scared. If a soul is lost or possessed by the demons, the assistance of a shaman becomes necessary. Using traditional methods, the shaman may visit the supernatural realm of the ghosts to restore the soul of a sick person. During the ceremony of soul restoring, the shaman uses white food products, while the sick person sits on a piece of new, white felt. Red silk thread stretched from the centre of a yurt to the nearest birch is meant to show the summoned soul the path towards the sick person. A man with a horse should stand next to the birch; this is notable because horses were believed to be the first creatures to notice the sought after soul. Next, the soul should enter the man holding the horse and then it will go along the thread to the yurt and into the sick person. The shaman sprinkles participants of the ceremony with milk or vodka, sings prayers to protective spirits and asks them for their assistance in restoring the soul of the sick person. The shaman enters a trance and restores the soul of the sick person (Sandschejew 1927: 580–3).

Apart from healing, the shamans also protected the local community against evil ghosts, conducted rituals and ceremonies as well as foretold the future. In their practice, they used drums that helped them to enter the trance. The apparel was also a key element. It included a special cap symbolising the protective spirit and long coat decorated with metal elements in shape of humans, animals, bells, etc. They depicted spirits, the power of which was adopted by the shaman during the trance (Fridman 2004: 145).

Buryat shamans may be divided into “white” and “black” categories. During the trance, a black shaman visits the underworld, while a white shaman travels to the overground, “heavenly” world (Basilov 1997: 36). So-called “mixed” shamans have started to appear, utilising both of these shamanistic systems (Kumin 2001).

In most cases, only an adult male over thirty years old could receive signs foretelling his shamanistic destiny. The so called shamanistic disease, which frequently brought adepts to the verge of death, was probably the most characteristic symptom of readiness. In most cases, the elder shaman read signs, healed the sick adept and conducted the ritual of shamanistic initiation. The power itself chose the shaman, while the disease was its symptom.

From 1920 onward, shamanism was prohibited in Soviet Union. Shamans could not conduct ceremonies and rituals, objects of magical importance were confiscated while shamans themselves were often sentenced to prison or death.

Buryat shamanism cannot be discussed without mentioning one of the forms of Buddhism, called Lamaism. The form of Buryat shamanism is a result of mutual interaction of these two religious systems.

Buddhist missionaries became active in Buryatia at the beginning of the 18th century. They were mostly lamas from Tibet, who gained the trust of the area’s inhabitants due to former’s prayers and medicine. In the first half of the 18th century (about 1730), the first *dacan* appeared, i.e. a combination of a monastery and Buddhist temple. Later, Lamaism spread through the whole of contemporary Buryatia. The turn of the 18th and 19th centuries was a period of its rapid development (Fridman 2004: 121). Just like local shamans, the lamas were controlled by the law and administration. The state tried to regulate the amount of lamas, their practices and lands they owned. However, both systems could develop in a relatively free manner until 1920, when Soviet authorities seized the lands that belonged to

the monasteries and temples, and forbade lamas to conduct religious practices. By 1930, all Buddhist monasteries in Buryatia had been closed or destroyed, and 16,000 lamas had been banished, imprisoned or killed (Fridman 2004: 123). A partial revival of Buddhism in Buryatia took place in 1946, when two monasteries were created there. Lamas could conduct prayers and rituals as long as they remained loyal to the Soviet authorities.

Nowadays, Buddhism is the main religion of Buryatia, and it is much easier to find a Buddhist than a shamanist there. The main reason for this situation may be the fact that people were afraid to reveal their religion due to the years of persecution of shamans and shamanists. Nevertheless, shamanists constitute a minority, even though frequently they are not aware that some elements of their religion stem not from ancient shamanism, but from Lamaistic practices that were adopted by the traditional Buryat shamanism.

The cult of *obo*, holy places of power, is one of the most visible manifestations of the specific syncretism of Buryat shamanism. Adherents of Buryat shamanism treat such places with particular respect, and the spirits that protect them are given offerings in forms of coins, ribbons, sweets or cigarettes. If a spirit does not receive an offering, it may harm people who neglected this duty. The intentions behind the offerings are different in Buddhism and in shamanism, even though it looks similar in both of these systems. Lamaism assumes that offerings are a manifestation of love of the spirit, of good feelings towards it. In shamanism, the offering is an expression of fear of harm that dissatisfied spirit could do (Fridman 2004: 133).

Many other rituals practiced by the Buddhists and shamanists in the region have similar character, even though these two religions differ from each other significantly. First, Buddhism is based on its written canon, while shamanism is an oral, unwritten and non-canonical religion. The fusion of Buddhist and shamanistic elements is not unilateral; over time, local lamas have also adapted some elements of shamanism that nowadays are considered Buddhist. The splashing milk in all four directions of the world (as a form of offering) or offerings to local waters and mountains – both these customs stem from shamanistic traditions. Therefore, the interweaving of those two religious systems for more than three hundred years has resulted in the appearance of not only a specific type of shamanism, but also gave birth to a specific kind of Lamaism. Both systems are practiced only in Buryatia and surrounding areas. Even though the Buddhism and shamanism of the area took peculiar and fascinating forms, the present work focuses only on the shamanism and its modern manifestations.

Modern forms of Buryat shaman activities

The present material was gathered during the fieldwork conducted in Buryatia, near Lake Baikal in 2010. The observed forms of shamanistic activity can be divided into three types, which can be classified (quite paradoxically) on the basis of their media usefulness. The peculiarity of the above statement will be explained in the more detail.

Buryat shamanism was fought by Soviet authorities from 1920 onward. Many shamans were killed or imprisoned; many others had to hide or abandon their traditions. As a result, generational continuity was interrupted. Traditionally, it was the senior, frequently old shaman, who was supposed to choose the heir, explain the shamanistic disease and its consequences as well as teach the practices to the chosen representative of a new generation. Modern shamans frequently had no one to learn from. There was

no older shaman to help them, thus some elements of shamanism were lost or forgotten. However, many traditions were secretly preserved.

Since 1992 and the change of the political system in Russia, shamanism can be practiced openly, but, as we have mentioned earlier, many people are not willing to openly admit their ways. That is why the study of local shamanism is difficult. Village dwellers are not keen to speak, when we tried to raise subjects connected with shamanism, they refused to talk at all. Interestingly enough, our Polish origins made contact with Buryats during our study easier. It was possible, because an average Buryat knows some of the history of Poland and is fairly familiar with our country's relationships with the Soviet Union and later Russia. The Smoleńsk disaster in 2010² was an additional reason for this interest in Poland. The study was conducted in the summer of 2010, only five months after the event. Inhabitants of villages by the Lake Baikal knew about the Polish tragedy and expressed their compassion. To some degree they united with us, and this also allowed them to open themselves to other subjects.

The study was conducted on Olkhon Island, a place that is tremendously important for Buryat shamanism. It is located by the Lake Baikal and separated from the land by the so called *Male Morie* (Small Sea). The open waters of Lake Baikal can be seen at the other, south-east side of the island. Olkhon is the biggest island on the lake, covering 742 km².



Figure 2: A map of Buryatia and Lake Baikal with Olkhon Island (A. Wierucka)

² On April 10th 2010 the plane carrying Polish president with his wife and many government officials crashed close to the airport in Smolensk, Russia. All 96 people died in the crash. The officials were going to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the events in Katyn (a mass execution of Polish nationals carried out by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), the Soviet secret police, in April and May 1940).

The island contains a holy place for the Buryats (consequently, the Russian authorities conducted activities aimed at the area's desacralisation in recent decades). The holy rock known as the *Shamanka* (Lady Shaman)³ is located just off shore of the island and is the main theme of numerous legends. One of them depicts a female shaman, who lived in a cave carved in the rock. Because the rock is actually a small peninsula by Lake Baikal, the shaman was inaccessible and could live in peace. That is where the name of the rock, *Shamanka*, comes from. The name's meaning is much deeper, however, and is not only a background for the ancient legend. The rock has mystical importance, it is a place of annual meetings of the spirits; they come to the *Shamanka* from the supernatural world on their horses. When spirits are occupied with the issues of mortal men, the ghosts of the horses remain at the rock. In ancient times, the power of this place was so strong that traditionally women were not allowed to climb the rock. Women were considered too sensitive to supernatural matters. Unfortunately, the *Shamanka* have become a tourist attraction; visitors damage it with graffiti and trash. It still has a crucial importance for the Buryats, although many visitors are not aware of place's significance for the local culture.



Figure 3: Shamanka on Olkhon Island (photo A. Wierucka)

³ Interestingly, in the languages of Evenks and Buryats, there is no word for a female shaman, only the male version of the word is available. *Shamanka* comes from the Russian language, in which the adaptation of a word shaman caused the creation of its female version (with feminine ending *-ka*) used to describe a woman-shaman (in Evenks' and Buryats' languages, there is no Slavic rule of ending feminine words with *-a*).

The fieldwork was conducted in the biggest village of Olkhon, Khuzhir, and in surrounding villages inhabited by the Buryats. Today, there are not as many Buryats on the Olkhon Island as there once were. More of them inhabit the south of the Lake Baikal, but we decided to hold our study on the island for a reason. Each year, the island hosts the *Tajlagan*, a shamanistic ceremony attended not only by the shamans from Buryatia, but also by those from Mongolia and Tuva. Observation of this ritual was one of the goals of our journey, but this will be discussed in the following chapter of the present work.

Shaman for the tourists

Olkhon is a traveling destination for many Europeans. The powers of Shamanka or Khoboy Cape has been known for a long time. Young people arrive here also to adore the vastness of the sky and water, to feel the clear air and cold waves of Lake Baikal. The deepest lake of the world, containing 20% of all the world's fresh water, it invariably makes a massive impression on the tourists. Sunrises and sunsets at the lake shore can be fascinating, as well as swirling clouds or falling rain. It is difficult to say whether it is the matter of water or air properties, but surely, each moment at the Lake Baikal is unique. Nevertheless, not many visitors have knowledge of the local culture. When we asked tourists from all around the world, not only they did not understand the complexity of Buryat culture, but in most cases they did not even know that the area has been inhabited by the Buryats for centuries. When we asked the visitors about the Buryats, it was frequently the first time they have ever heard the ethnonym. Therefore, it is unsurprising that they did not have general knowledge about various aspects of Buryat culture.

Valentin Khagdaev, a Buryat shaman who practices the ancient tradition on Olkhon, tries to fill this gap with his work. He is controversial, but some of the facts seem to work in his advantage.

Valentin Khagdaev was born in 1960 in the family of well-known blacksmiths. His grandfather was a shaman of immense power. From the very beginning, Valentin knew that his path should be connected with shamanism: he was born with a double thumb, a sign that clearly indicated the interference of spirits and marked him with a stigma of power.

As a child, Valentin entered the trance and saw his body turned into bubbles. When bubbles became numerous, the boy was approached by spirits who tried to help him. They asked him questions, and someone answered them. Valentin did not want to return to the ground, because he felt good up in the air, where he floated in the form of the bubbles. Despite those early signs of affinity to the group of shamans, Valentin underwent his initiation when he was thirty years old. In accordance with the Buryat tradition, only adults can undergo the initiation, because children could not bear the shamanistic powers. Valentin was given the shamanistic attributes by an 85-year-old shaman. Valentin's protective spirits are the eagle, lizard and black horse he was given during his initiation (Fridman 2004: 202).

Valentin claims that most prominent cultural activities that should be conducted on Olkhon include the revitalisation of traditional religion and language (the island's inhabitants can no longer speak the Buryat language) and the restoration of respect for

the nature (contemporary lack of respect for nature is clearly visible on Olkhon Island: in abandoned, deteriorating factories, in omnipresent waste disposal sites and in the polluted waters of Lake Baikal, contaminated with various types of sewage and waste). The shaman expresses his anxiety about the future of Buryat culture.

The main goal that Khagdaev set for himself is to make tourists aware of the Buryat culture and religion. Even though the task is noble and the shaman himself is a member of the Buryat culture and bears all signs of shamanistic powers, his show (it is difficult to describe it as a performance, and it certainly cannot be treated as a trance or another manifestation of the power) is clearly disappointing and gives birth to many questions that, sadly, remain unanswered.

At first, the shaman spread tree bark smoke over his audience; next, he used Tibetan Singing Bowls to purify us with sound. Next, Valentin started his story about Buryat culture and shamanism. When he discussed various sources that describe the shamanism, he collated such names as Eliade and Castaneda; this seemed to be dubious (Mircea Eliade was a scientist who wrote the most famous work about shamanism, while Carlos Castaneda is known mainly for his popular-science publications, the reliability of which has frequently been questioned). Next, he presented a definition of shamanism he worked on for years:

Shamanism is love and respect for the language and legends of the nation, it is a cult of holy fire, great ancestors, rulers of the villages, soil, sky, the Sun and the Moon. It means paying homage to the creator of the Earth and to mother nature. It means life in harmony with the nature and evasion of harm towards others (Valentin Khagdaev's utterance during a meeting organised on Olkhon Island on 29 July 2010).

It seems that even shamans themselves have their own definitions of shamanism, or maybe it is them who should provide this definition, not the theoreticians who are not capable of understanding the matters connected with shamanistic practice fully. In the following part of the meeting, Khagdaev quoted texts in Buryat language and talked about Buryat culture.

A scientist from Krasnoyarsk, who cooperated with us during the fieldwork, defined Valentin Khagdaev as cultural animator. We think that it is one of the most precise descriptions of his activities. Undoubtedly, the activities of Khagdaev are necessary on Olkhon, i.e. education in the fields of culture, religion, practices and customs, as well as teachings about signs and symbols. However, it still is not the traditional Buryat shamanism the we were looking for during our study. Residents of Khuzhir treat Khagdaev with a slight trace of disdain, reflecting their knowledge about his frequent contacts with media and tourists. They shared information that Khagdaev does not "heal" them, but they are attended by a shaman from another village who looks after them. Therefore, Khagdaev's activities can be perceived as educating visitors and teaching about shamanistic activity, but not necessarily actually practicing it.

Shaman Khagdaev is an unusually media-friendly person. He has appeared in numerous interviews, documentaries, and he makes use of all modern technology. This should come as no surprise, because he is clearly a 21st century man, and no one has ever claimed that shamans should be people who live traditional lives. In a world full of technology, its use is perfectly natural. Moreover, Khagdaev is well educated: he has

a degree in philosophy and doctorate in humanistic studies. Nowadays, he works as a museum director in Yelca.

It is easy to check the general opinion about him expressed by modern media. A brief internet search on 20 January 2013 yielded 371 pages of results concerning this shaman; most of them use descriptions such as: ‘one of the most famous shamans of Russian Federation’, ‘main shaman of Olkhon’, ‘the most important shaman in the area,’ or even ‘the greatest wizard of Olkhon’.⁴



Figure 4: Shaman Valentin Khagdaev talking on the phone during a break in the meeting (July 29, 2010) (photo A. Wierucka)

Periodicals corroborate these opinions. For instance, the Polish magazine *Polityka* in one of its issues included the following description of Khagdaev: ‘the most authentic, commissioned by the spirits (the sixth finger is its sign)’ (Bunda & Sapala 2004). It seems that shaman Khagdaev is present in media and in the consciousness of tourists visiting Olkhon. Unfortunately, it only gives evidence of people’s ignorance in the field of both Buryat and shamanistic traditions. Even the most basic information within this field would make it easier to verify the shaman’s activity – and he is an extremely busy

⁴ Citations come from the pages: <http://taraka.pl/szamanKhagdaev>, accessed on 8 October 2012. <http://wiadomosci.ngo.pl/wiadomosci/39067.html>, accessed on 8 October 2012. http://wyborcza.pl/dziennikokolymski/5,109329,6709473,Zdjecia_z_podrozy_Jacka_Hugo_Badera.html?i=98, accessed on 8 October 2012. <http://wiadomosci.wp.pl/kat,1330,title,Wielkie-sprzatanie-wyspy-czarownikow,wid,280375,wiadomosc.html>.

man, his schedule is always heavily packed. It is virtually impossible to arrange a meeting with him without significant advance arrangements, and even during a scheduled séance the shaman receives numerous phone calls and arranges meetings with other people. As we have mentioned earlier, Khagdaev's activities are beneficial for Olkhon Island and its surroundings. Nevertheless, we felt that we were looking for a different kind of shaman.

Shamans in the organisation

Some groups of Buryats recognise the hierarchy of gods or spirits. The western group, inhabiting the areas around the Lake Baikal, accepts a certain category of gods that are situated higher in the hierarchy than the ancestors' ghosts. These gods are called *tengeri* or *tengri* (heaven in the Buryat language). According to the subject literature, this category of gods has no significant influence on shamanistic rituals (Hamayon 1999: 85). There are ninety-nine *Tengeris*, each of them has its own name, and they are divided into two groups: eastern (*zuni*) and western (*buruni*) (Czaplicka 2007: 148). The God Father, known also



Figure 5: A shaman turned towards the Shamanka during the Tajlagan (photo A. Wierucka)

as the High Sky (von Lupke 2009: 234), is the hundredth *tengeri*. The word *tengeri* is nowadays used to describe a group of Buryat shamans called *Mestnaya Religioznaya Organizatsiya Shamanov*, registered in Ulan-Ude, the capital city of Buryatia. Shamans of this group can be found during the *Tajlagan* ritual, when they gather from various sides of the state and from abroad. Very often they are accompanied by shamans from Mongolia and Tuva. *Tajlagan* is a social ceremony, the aim of which is to honour the clan's spirits (Stutley 2003: 54). Today, it has a slightly broader meaning as it is both the meeting of shamans from the area, as well as a great occasion for local adherents to meet with shamans and ask them for help.

Tajlagan begins around 11 a.m. Residents of nearby villages, shamans and spectators gather on the square by the lake, where they can all clearly see the Shamanka Rock. Nine birches, cut specially for this occasion, are put firmly in the ground. A birch is the holy tree for the Buryats and constitutes a vital element during most important rituals.

At the very beginning, all participants of the ritual are symbolically purified. Women and men looking at the shamans' work (among them shamanists, tourists, journalists, etc.) sit at two opposite sides of the square and are not allowed to enter the area occupied by the shamans until midday.

Tables set in front of the shamans are full of offerings to the spirits; nowadays these offerings include mainly vodka and milk, but sometimes also sweets or cigarettes. The ceremony begins with a rhythmic, long-lasting drumming. The offering of a sheep is a crucial moment; it is done by the fire. The meat is then cooked and later put under the birches as a symbolic offering.



Figure 6: Shamans' tables with offerings (photo A. Wierucka)

Blue scarves are attached to the treetops as a sign of the High Sky. In earlier times, people used pelts of white hares or deer, but now colourful pieces of fabric are usually used instead. A decorated birch symbolises a tree of life in Buryat culture.

During the ceremony, colourful ribbons are attached to the birches, and in the end all nine trees are put in one place where they are symbolically offered in the fire. Participants of the Tajlagan walk around the flame three times in order to thank the spirits for their help and to secure the ghosts' assistance in the future.



*Figure 7: Shamans during Tajlagan with decorated birches in the background
(photo A. Wierucka)*

The ritual is not what it used to be. It is conducted not by twelve shamans, but by every shaman that attend it. Sometimes there are more than twenty shamans leading the ritual (as it was during 2010 Tajlagan). In earlier times, each family that took part in the celebration needed to bring a sheep for the offering. Today only one sheep is ritually killed, and its meat is not consumed by all participants of the ceremony, but is entirely offered to the spirits after it is cooked. Traditionally, during the second part of Tajlagan, the spirits were also offered a mare (Stutley 2003: 54; Hoppal 2007: 111), but this custom is no longer practiced.

During the ritual, the shamans enter a trance many times. During the first part of the celebration, they summon the spirits that await at the Shamanka Rock, visible in the distance. The spirits eventually come, and the shamans are ready to help the adherents. Shamanists gather around a shaman, who enters the trance. When words of spirits are

uttered, the adherents crowd at shaman's feet with their requests. For an observer from the outside, this part of the ritual appears to be the most "real" one – the shamans become intermediaries between the spirits and the people, between the supernatural and the everyday reality, and simultaneously they act for the benefit of the local community.

At the end of the second part of the ritual, the shamans sit in a single row and thank the spirits for their help. The sound of numerous drums is tremendously moving and even though they can be heard many times during the day, this moment at sunset is especially touching. Tajlagan lasts for several hours and ends shortly before sunset.



Figure 8: Ending of Tajlagan (photo A. Wierucka)

Shamans from Tengeri organisation look remarkably similar, wearing long blue coats made of glossy material, sewn according to the characteristic, traditional Buryat design. Before they enter the trance, they put special caps with fringes covering their faces on their heads. The caps have eyes sewn into them that symbolise the protective spirit. On top of the cap, the shamans put special hats with horns and ribbons. Each shaman has a circular, metal mirror hung on his neck. It is supposed to protect them against evil spirits. Shamans entering the trance is assisted by other shamans who lead them through all stages of the trance (intoning songs, singing together with shamans entering trance, passing or receiving the drum, accepting the spirit's blessing in their own names and in the name of local shamanists and controlling the behaviour of shamans in the trance). The fact that one of the shamans could not regain consciousness after entering the trance may be treated as an evidence for the depth of the trance entered by consecutive shamans. A

shaman that assisted her could not revive her for a couple of long minutes, even though the adherents were long gone and the singing had ceased.

The strictly obeyed unification of appearance and shamanistic attributes used by the Tengeri group raises some questions or doubts that unfortunately could not be clarified during our study. After a whole day of multiple trances, the shamans were on the verge of exhaustion, interviewing them at that time was out of the question. However, in a time of various self-appointed ‘shamans’ that have nothing in common with the real religion, the Tengeri organisation provides spectators with the certainty that they are watching shamans that know their art.



Figure 9: A shaman blessing one of his adherents (photo A. Wierucka)

As far as the shamanists are concerned, they took an active part in the ritual. The fact may serve as the best recommendation for the ceremony. During the shamans’ trance, the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages accepted blessings of the spirits, asked for guidance and healing and offered their own offerings: they poured milk and vodka, threw sweets and bread in the air and bowed three times to all four directions of the world. This was one of few moments when these people appeared not only to be proud of their faith, but also they were keen to manifest it without any constraints – one of a few real, fully shamanistic moments.



Figure 10: Shamanists' offerings at the end of Tajlagan (photo A. Wierucka)

Shamans of the villages

There are only few villages on Olkhon Island. The study was conducted in Khuzhir, Maly Khuzhir, Yalga and Kharantsy. The main village of the island, Khuzhir, is deprived of its shaman, or at least there is no shaman that looks after common people, i.e. one who would heal them, advise them or foretell their future. In general, it is quite difficult to find a shaman on Olkhon. As mentioned earlier, most people refuse to talk about them. Sometimes, if someone is relaxed by a morning dose of alcohol, we could get some information about a shaman living at the peripheries in a small wooden hut with characteristic Siberian blue window shutters. Some people closed their door when they saw us; other allowed us to ask them some questions. We lack concrete data about the village shamans simply because they are hard to find. They do not look for fame, they do not wear blue clothes, and very often they do not use hats with horns. A drum is the only attribute they use, and it is kept in a non-evident place. Nevertheless, they act for the benefit of local communities, they undo harms done by evil ghosts, they ask for the assistance of benevolent spirits, they sing songs, bless the adherents, conduct offering ceremonies, mark places of power, of which Olkhon Island is full. Moreover, they are the only people in the area that can speak Buryat language. For sure, on the terrains south of Baikal, where there are more Buryats, and there is less influence from Russian culture, such shamans (full time and not media-friendly, but everyday working shamans) might be easier to find.

Conclusions

Shamanistic practices have been conducted on Olkhon Island for centuries. As one of the most celebrated places for the Buryats, the island was a witness to numerous ceremonies and rituals, multiple offerings to the spirits, many examples of healing and help given to the adherents. Places of power are still visited not only by the shamanists, but also by the tourists attracted by the unquestionable magic of the island, its waters and rocks. People that have nothing to do with shamanism, meekly climb the twin rocks near the Khoboy Cape, because they are convinced that if they set their feet on one of them, in the future they will have sons, while if they step on the other they will have daughters. Laughter and jokes are full of respect for local places of power. Many of them are covered with legends of wise, courageous people, whose deeds made this land holy and remembered for generations.

As we mentioned earlier, modern Olkhon shamanism is divided due to its specific relation with the media. One group includes shamans who in various ways are present in the media, e.g. in movies, the world wide web, books or radio broadcasts. The second group comprises organised shamans, whose activities are visible, who are visited by journalists and who are easily recognisable due to their blue clothes. And finally, the third group, shamans that not only cannot be seen, but who do not want to be noticed and who conduct their practice in small villages. Obviously, it is difficult to state which of those groups is the most important. Certainly such a statement makes no sense, because perhaps all these forms of activities are needed. Surely, however, the observed division into groups is a proof for profound changes that underwent not only within the shamanism of this very region, but also within the mentality of people. Much irreversible harm was done to Buryat culture by Soviet administration. Moreover, the influence of modern, rapidly changing world demands a greater attractiveness and spectacularity of shamanistic activity. Perhaps the practices of shaman Khagdaev and Tengeri shamans partially correspond to those demands. They probably personify an answer to the requirements of the outer world, requirements that became more and more palpable even in such remote areas. However, some questions remained unanswered. Is the direction taken by those shamans appropriate, would the media attractiveness bring other benefits than making people of other religions aware of the rules of shamanism? Is the work among the people that can trust their shaman with their problems the only proper path towards the preservation of faith and supporting the generational continuity of shamanism? This question must wait few years, when we will be able to determine the shape of shamanistic practice, the shamans' fate and whether or not the shamanists will still use their services.

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Povzetek

Burjati živijo v Sibiriji. Njihovi običaji se hitro spreminjajo, a na nekaterih področjih je njihova tradicionalna religija, šamanizem, preživela. Čeprav je pod vplivom globalizacije, še vedno ohranja dokaj močan položaj. Na otoku Olkhon na Bajkalskem jezeru najdemo različne šamanistične prakse. Te prakse obstajajo kot odziv na potrebe lokalnih ljudi in na zahteve sodobnega sveta. Na podlagi terenskega dela, izvedenega v letu 2010, se članek osredotoča na tri oblike poklicnega šamanizma: prvi je predvsem za turiste, druga poteka prek organizacije šamanov; tretjega pa prakticirajo v majhnih vaseh. Vse te oblike kažejo na raznolikost sodobnega šamanizma, ki se spreminja in išče svoje mesto v kompleksni realnosti.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: Burjatski šamanizem, šamanistične prakse, avtohtoni prebivalci Sibirije

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